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Alec McHoul

'The styles of Eric Michaels:
a rhetorical analysis'

Something I have found constantly enticing about Eric Michaels' work is that it is often very specific in its local and particular detail while refusing to add up to anything like an explicit 'position' on more global matters. Still less is there a 'grand theory' either of culture in general or of the specific Aboriginal practices and people in which Eric Michaels took so much interest. The point of the present analysis is to see whether it is possible to trace this double shuffle between local specificity and global indeterminacy in Michaels' 'styles', in the concrete textual specifics of his writing. As a case in point, I will turn to his paper 'Bad Aboriginal Art'. [\[note 1\]](#)

In some ways this is a bad choice; it gives the game away within its own pages, albeit towards the very end. There, in the penultimate paragraph, it becomes clear that definite aesthetic judgments about Aboriginal art cannot be made in terms of the 'authenticity' or 'tradition' craved by many white and/or Eurocentric art experts. The paper, up to that point, is an unsuccessful attempt to track down empirical, ethnographically grounded, examples of what could count as 'bad' art in the context of Western desert painting practices. The rationale is that the category of 'good art' is routinely unavailable without a counterpart.

Michaels' first case is the notorious re-painted (perhaps 'over-painted') caves on Mt Barnett Station where a number of youths from Derby were accused of effectively desecrating a traditional rock art site, despite the fact that they were officially commissioned to undertake the project and had 'cultural' backing from at least some of the site's traditional owners. Michaels gives very little away, at least directly, in terms of his own views of the affair and its relation to Aboriginal cultural production (that is, whether he thinks the product counts as good or bad). Nevertheless, he does appear to have most sympathy for David Mowjarlai's stand on the matter; he being the elder who oversaw and defended the restoration. But since his position is never completely generalised, it would be going too far to suggest that Michaels is one hundred percent behind the now rather popular view that anything is possible in Aboriginal cultural practices; that, for example, American trivia can be 'appropriated' by and within 'authentic' practices, leading to positive and even 'subversive' readings. [\[note 2\]](#) Yet he seems much closer to this position than that of the other school of (frequently American) Aboriginalists who mourn every 'cross-cultural' event as the erosion of a deep-seated, essential, pan-Aboriginal identity. [\[note 3\]](#)

Perhaps it is fairer to say that he works hard on a refusal to judge at this level at all; with only occasional preferences of this kind showing through. (Moreover, Michaels' critique of pan-Aboriginalism is carefully targeted not at 'Aborigines' but at governmental pan-Aboriginalist strategies and policies.) Instead of adjudicating 'professionally', he tries to show that judgments can and must only be made *in situ*, by the painters themselves; and that analysts should turn instead to the contexts of those choices, the forms of 'production, circulation and exchange' (BAA, 60) as they arise in specific social and historical localities. The nearest we get to a generalisation here is that those sites tend by and large to be shot through with racism and colonialism and so, in many cases, will express those conditions rather than some deeper, pre-historical, cultural tradition in the form of 'pure Aboriginality', 'primitivism' and so on.

Nevertheless, such evasive writing cannot itself avoid being a form of judgment. To quote: "these works are *to be judged* first and foremost in terms of the social practices which produce and circulate them" (BAA, 72, my italics). This is a clear delimitation; it includes and precludes certain categories of person from making socio-aesthetic judgments (*in extremis*: master Aboriginal painters as against tourists). To be sure, Michaels shifts the terrain of aesthetics from the art object 'itself' (whatever that could mean) to the history and politics of production. The manoeuvre, after all, is a well-known marxish one. But the residues of aesthetic judgment remain.

As in so much post-marxism, these residues entail lingering notions of authenticity, validity and the rest, albeit in somewhat displaced guises. For example, with regard to the fact that a number of Aboriginal works have included

"large areas filled in by Europeans", Michaels writes: "My argument so far leads me to accept that this is perfectly valid, and that any notions of authenticity which are compromised by such practices are false criteria in the first place" (BAA, 70). Hence validity and authenticity are not radically excluded but are simply shifted away from reference to 'originary' cultural forms and towards the idea of expressing particular local conditions (which, in this case, happen to include concrete relations between Aborigines and 'Europeans', including Michaels himself). As we shall see, the exclusion of an *originary culture* as an aesthetic yardstick is often closely identified, occasionally to the point of conflation, in 'Bad Aboriginal Art', with another exclusion: that of the utterly *decontextualised artwork*, the painting in-and-of-itself. Both seem to constitute a myth of 'the original'.

This is why it seems odd to me that Michaels should refer, at the end of his paper, to "that dangerous fantasy of authenticity" and to present a case for "issues of authority, not authenticity" (BAA, 72) when, clearly, 'authority' is a particular socio-political reconstruction of the outmoded aesthetic category that it would ideally replace. Michaels' 'productionism' certainly rotates the axis of aesthetic investigation; but the rotation leaves it in the same geometric plane. Going on (and back), then, to the penultimate paragraph, it appears even more peculiar that Michaels should write:

But I have not presented any criteria which can be used to judge the art object itself. I have failed to define bad Aboriginal art, or pose any scheme for evaluating the good as my title seems to promise. This is intentional. (BAA, 72)

In some ways, this is true—though some readers would have preferred it earlier in the piece. If a work of art could be isolated, voided of all context in some pristine way (which it cannot), then *that* object (confined purely to its own frame and surface) would be one for which Michaels offers no criteria of judgment. Instead he shows that the productional circumstances of much Aboriginal art preclude such criteria:

[The work] is the product of too many discourses: the painters' attempts to have their designs (and themselves) acknowledged seriously in the contemporary market, the market's requirements for exchange-value fodder, and the consumer/collector's own interests which may well include the desire to be associated with auras of authenticity as well as investment speculation. The contradictions of this system resist resolution. (BAA, 72)

Hence, then, no grand aesthetic theory—but also no theory of how a particular kind of cultural product relates to determinate political and economic circumstances. For example, is the above statement unique to Western Desert painting, or could it apply equally, for example, to the restoration of vintage cars? Instead: both the art object and its locus of production are so utterly particularised that they give rise to multiple contradictions which "resist resolution". Henceforth, if Michaels is to be believed, one can only come to grips with specific productional circumstances: "Judgments of the product must always—ultimately—be exposed as fraud" (BAA, 73).

Does this include judgments of the product which shift attention away from it 'as such' and towards its locus of production? If so, then the contradictions lie not only in the nexus between Aboriginal art and the complex discourses of the market and of the institutions of art collection and consumption. The discourse(s) of avant-garde ethnography (*pace Art & Text*) would seem to have to be included too. In what follows, I want to see how this double articulation between local detail and theoretical indeterminacy (or between empirical specificity and judgmental refusal) works in a particular passage of 'Bad Aboriginal Art', its opening paragraph. What I want to get at is the specific discursive mechanisms which appear so successful and persuasive: producing as they do so much interest and 'newsy' attraction in a style of writing which obstinately refuses to take up any normative thesis in the face of the complexity of political-ethnographic detail.

* * * * *

The title reads as follows:

Bad Aboriginal Art

by Eric Michaels

This takes up about a third of the page and it says at least two things. It says there is a paper by Eric Michaels called 'Bad Aboriginal Art' and that this is it. It also says: bad Aboriginal art by Eric Michaels. As it turns out, Eric Michaels was indeed responsible for some 'Aboriginal' art as a 'European' contributor to a canvas which he later found on sale at the Yuendumu community store (BAA, 70), though whether it was bad or not, Michaels characteristically refuses to say. Which raises a question: if it was bad, was it bad art ('as such') or bad *Aboriginal* art? Was what was bad about it some kind of aesthetic business, or the fact that its Aboriginality was in doubt because a white man had some part in painting it?

And that brings us immediately back to the confrontation between questions of aesthetics and questions of authenticity—questions which both the 'art world' and 'anthropology' are perfectly capable of conflating. There is a problematic here which Michaels (in his rejection of 'aesthetic' judgmentalism) ignores. Instead of (judgmentally?) rejecting traditional aesthetic judgments like this, we could ask how they function, directly and materially in the very processes Michaels examines, though to do so may take us away from loci of production to technologies of consumption. Why, for example, does something called 'authenticity' frequently come to guarantee beauty or some other positive aesthetic value? Why, as a number of even non-conservative critics (Umberto Eco and John Berger, for example) seem to believe, do 'fakes' count as less beautiful than 'originals'? And how is authenticity discursively constructed? In the case of Eric Michaels' paintings, it seems that authenticity tends to be judged solely by white Euro-American interests after the fact of their production—*whatever* the details of that production. For that matter, there is a point in the story where Michaels himself ("as advisor and in-house critic at Yuendumu" (BAA, 68)) prompts a more senior painter over the matter of 'borrowing' Papunya-style dots into a specific canvas (BAA, 69-70). This is the first paradox: what a painting is 'in the first place' is an effect of what it comes to be later on, how it stands in the market for example. The next part of the paradox is that what it comes to be later on is often decided on the basis of an aesthetic judgment of the mythical art-object in itself. So Tim Johnson is hung alongside Aboriginal painters in a number of galleries and exhibitions purely on the basis of the 'look' of his canvasses. [\[note 4\]](#) Authenticity constitutes aesthetic merit, but aesthetic judgments constitute authenticity. That is, there's a mutually constitutive (or 'reflexive') relation [\[note 5\]](#) between the 'look' of the canvas and the authenticity (or otherwise) of the 'object'; between its value as a commodity and its surface arrangement.

But, it's important to note, the two matters must be taken together. While there can be no pure art-object-in-itself, what *counts* as that (within certain discourses) and what *counts* as the value of that object are intertwined. Merely repudiating these matters of 'value' and 'pure object', it would seem to me, would tend to shackle any production-based argument right from the start. It would seem to mean that such an analysis would be wedded to an indeterminate outcome from the start; to an outcome very like Michaels' in 'Bad Aboriginal Art', in fact. No doubt he is right: all judgments of the product may well be "fraud". But then the reflexive working of that fraud begs to be worked out; along with a clear idea of the analytic (or indeed *judgmental*) basis by which anything is properly called "fraud".

And, to compound the contradictions, it is also true that Michaels wants to say that historical/productional knowledge—for example, knowing that there have been European hands and brushes at work—cannot prevent paintings from being authentically (or authoritatively) Aboriginal. To use his own term, they may be "valid". In this case, neither the conditions of production, up to and including the 'cultural membership' of the artist(s), *nor* some intrinsic feature of the finished piece—neither process *nor* product—can stand as final guarantors of the title of 'validity'. So what can? What does Michaels mean when he talks about validity and authority? How, specifically, do they substitute for the bad judgmental categories that he wants to replace? Clearly, mere reference to productional specifics, materials, techniques and so forth will not do. A more interesting question here might be: why does anyone still want to know what is valid? Perhaps the problem is not an empirical one. Perhaps it is the idea of *knowing* about works of art that is the problem. That is, perhaps knowledge itself (which we sometimes think can do anything, go anywhere) has run to its limit in this case. The painting's being 'Aboriginal' is not something which can be *known*. 'Know' is the wrong term. And we (will) have to struggle to find the right one: perhaps it should be 'see', 'accomplish' or even 'arrange'. Perhaps these are equally short of the mark.

But in the 'art world', the one where tastes are defined and commodities bought and sold, questions of knowledge and analysis always crop up. The art world is where one must and therefore can 'know something about art'—even though 'aesthetic knowledge' may well be a contradiction in terms. The art world is crucial for paintings to exist, thrive and

circulate. Yet, not unlike anthropology, it is predicated on an epistemic paradox. Hence the art world produces some very odd forms of discourse, transgressing anything that might be called 'ordinary language'. For example, the art world may transfer a painting from an aesthetic to an epistemic domain in order to suit its purpose of 'having a knowledge' of art. Hence the painting becomes a 'text'. It is 'read' rather than looked at, and so forth. It comes under the hammer, the pounding, marking, franking and dollaring of art talk and writing. And, paradoxically enough, this additional processing does not make the painting count as less authentic—it makes it count as more. And this is just as true of those discourses on art which call themselves 'postmodern' and/or 'poststructuralist', discourses which have set themselves up in opposition to definite textual origins and ends. They, too, confer authenticity: a new canon of the least original, the most derivative. Authenticity—and this is not a complaint but a noticing—is a kind of complicity. Insofar as theory is knowledge, art theory is an epistemic site. It is the positioning of a painting with respect to this site (its acceptance inside it, for example, or else the opposite) which decides its authenticity. Which is to say: its value. And, with every due respect, while Eric Michaels does *mention* matters of circulation and distribution, his rather too narrow analytic focus on production tends to background the former considerations as detailed practices affecting his crucial categories of 'validity' and 'authorisation'.

Ostensibly, the topic of 'Bad Aboriginal Art' is the conditions under which works are both "generated and sold" (BAA, 72); but the second half of this topic cannot but include consideration of the different spaces of official and commercial aesthetic judgment ('fraudulent' as they may be). For example, there is the difference between a painting being accepted as an instance of the good or typical work in a genre as against its notoriety as an instance of the bad. Certain kinds of kitsch have cropped up in this second category and become collectibles alongside the officially tasteful. Against both of these categories would be works which never make the art shops, galleries, exhibitions or catalogues: works which pass beneath official-aesthetic and commercial attention.

Eric Michaels' own Aboriginal painting began *public* life as the first of these, being offered for sale in an Aboriginal community store. No better guarantee of its validity. The disclosure of 'Bad Aboriginal Art', the paper, will probably draw it closer to the next category. And no doubt it will eventually slide beyond the horizon and end up in the last category. Or else, with Duchamp, for example, it could become a celebrated piece of authentic iconoclasm and return to the first position; while other similar cases go undetected. But wherever it resides at any given moment is what it 'is'. The painting is its discursive site—in a more radical sense than Michaels' notion of merely productional 'authority' allows. And one of the relevant fragments of discourse, in this case, would be the text of 'Bad Aboriginal Art' itself. Let's see how it works over and through the issues on our agenda so far, turning now to the body of the text following the title.

* * * * *

"During 1987 the Australian press reported frequently that Aboriginal Art, especially Western Desert [1] acrylic 'dot paintings', had become flavour of the month in New York, Paris and Munich" (the bracketed footnote number is original, not added). Coming after the title 'Bad Aboriginal Art' and all it might imply, we may be very tempted to read this highly declarative or propositional sentence as a complaint or even the preface to a critique: a critique of the Australian press and also of those places, New York, Paris, Munich—though it may be harder to guess that it also conceals a preference for the "sloppy" (BAA, 68) Yuendumu style over the neater Papunya dot style. However the other sites and technologies (the press, the cities, etc.), despite Michaels' semi-neglect of them in the body of the paper, at least partly determine what the paintings are, aesthetico-economically. They are sites and technologies where the authenticity and value of the paintings are assembled—sometimes in the face of their merely productional authority.

The cities are synonymous with 'taste'; a term which is rapidly becoming a kind of stock market index. In Paris, for example:

***He led her across the room and through a doorway. A graying, heavyset Frenchman in a rumpled corduroy suit was speaking into the handset of a phone. On the phone's screen she saw columns of letters and figures. The day's quotations on the New York market.

***"Ah," the man said, "Estevez. Excuse me. Only a moment." He smiled apologetically and returned to his conversation. Marly studied the quotations. Pollock was down again. This, she supposed, was the

aspect of art that she had the most difficulty understanding. Picard, if that was the man's name, was speaking with a broker in New York, arranging the purchase of a certain number of "points" of the work of a particular artist. A "point" might be defined in any number of ways, depending on the medium involved, but it was almost certain that Picard would never see the works he was purchasing. If the artist enjoyed sufficient status, the originals were very likely crated away in some vault, where no one saw them at all. Days or years later, Picard might pick up that same phone and order the broker to sell. [\[note 6\]](#)

What goes on in such exchanges is evidently very important, despite their distance from the Western desert. But perhaps it is not as important as what is *reported* as going on there, in the press for example. In 1987, then, the Australian press was reporting the siting of certain kinds of Aboriginal art as both 'inside' the official market and 'good'. Its 'points' were high. And somehow, Michaels' style suggests, there is something wrong or amiss with it doing so well, running so bullishly. What specifically? It has something to do with the mode of expression for this quantitative positioning of the work: flavour of the month. And note that Eric Michaels doesn't put quotation marks around the term. This is free indirect speech, a summary of the kind of thing the Australian press was saying at the time; glossing other expressions of incredulity.

One point about the term 'flavour of the month' is that it displays the art world's central contradiction: that it attempts to rework matters of fashion (which are fleeting, intangible, mercurial) into knowledges (which are fixed, eternal, universal). 'Flavour' points to taste, to the timelessness of Great Art. 'Month' points to the changing vagaries of the fashion world. To be 'flavour of the month' is to be at the pinnacle of acceptance within the domain of aesthetic 'knowledge' and, therefore, to be already on the verge of obsolescence. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The superscripted footnote number after 'Desert' takes us, characteristically, to points both before and after New York, Paris and Munich, to Michaels' primary concern for the most local issues: "Whether to classify Warlpiri people and their art as coming from the Western or Central Desert is somewhat more our problem than theirs". (And note, here, the referent of the word 'our', for later it will change.) He continues, "Because I am drawing some comparisons to work from the Kimberleys, and because I wish to imply some continuity of techniques, I will class the Warlpiri as 'Western' here. In fact, there were once probably extensive continuities of some painting techniques throughout Australia. Certainly, that is the situation today: acrylic 'dot paintings' are being produced in Sydney suburbs, north Queensland workshops, Singapore towelling mills, Japanese printing houses ... perhaps everywhere". (The ellipses are his, not mine. It's very important, after all, to get the ownership of the dots right.)

Moving from text to footnote, there is a movement of topics: from the classification of paintings (by art consumers, the market) to the classification of peoples (its producers). Michaels suggests, though he does not elaborate, a collocation between art economics and the perpetual problems of anthropological and colonialist discourse(s). Anthropology, at least, has to do with getting one's modes of classification straight. And 'straight' means something like 'in accordance with the classifications of the people themselves', at least within post-Malinowskian 'emic' ethnography. But, at the same time, it's clear that *no* classification of this kind (Western/Central) is *a propos* for these particular people themselves. So, if anthropology must classify here, the footnote reads, any classification may do—as a heuristic—just as it did under colonialist discourses which had no such emic pretensions, where the requirement was knowability of the unknown at any cost. [\[note 7\]](#) But then: what are the grounds for the nomenclature if they can't be anthropological ones? The answer, surprisingly for an anti-aesthetic text, is that they should be aesthetic grounds—the classification ('Western') fits into a tighter, more consistent, more pleasing pattern if the anthropologist and his readers decide to work that way. And so then we can move back out again, via a tentative position on the spread of painting techniques, to a universalised locale of production: Sydney, north Queensland, Singapore, Japan ... "perhaps everywhere" (and this time the dots are mine).

Note, again, that as soon as a particular category (even such an apparently simple one as 'Western') is 'thought', or transformed into formal knowledge, it disappears as a distinct category. It diversifies, spreads out, thins, becomes dispersed and disseminated. The aesthetic problem and the anthropological problem don't quite collapse into one another, though they almost do. But they do suffer exactly the same kind of diffusion into nothing, into the arbitrary, into a space where (to summarise Michaels' central point again) "the question of authenticity does not arise". [\[note 8\]](#) It is a moot point as to whether this absence of authenticity is a property of the 'object' (the art-work), of its locus of production, or of the postmodernist anthropological discourse which describes them. Indeed, any postmodernist theory

would only have one choice in the matter: neither 'object' nor 'context' have meaning over and above their constitutive texts and discourses.

If, by virtue of this arbitrariness, anthropological categories are in doubt generally, this could lead to some potentially very serious questions—ones which I think are very close to but never quite on the surface of Eric Michaels' text. [\[note 9\]](#) One seminal question is, vis-à-vis Aborigines: same or different? Are Aborigines (their paintings, their specific productional conditions, and so on) anthropologically important because they are so different and distinct from white Europeans, or, on the contrary because, *like us*, they are not unproblematically available to formal kinds of knowledge? Is Papunya Tula important because it is like or unlike minimalism? Ditto the Yuendumu doors and expressionism? What is Michaels' exact position on this? Sometimes the 'discovery' of postmodernist 'tendencies' or parallels in Aboriginal art is a cause for celebration: at other times it appears merely to be a marketing error. The traditional anthropological answer has always been in terms of difference, distinction and alterity. Anthropology as a discipline is predicated on discoveries of difference, distinction and alterity. However, both possible answers (same or different) are, in turn, predicated on not-knowing, on the absence of knowledge. But there are two kinds of absence here, one for each case. In the case of difference, we mean 'mysteriousness': not known because radically and unfathomably Other. In the case of sameness, we mean 'meaningless' (in the sense of the absence of a pure and fixed meaning, a concept without an opposite): not knowable because not utterable, what may be clearly shown but not said. The problem, if sufficiently elaborated, could be devastating for professional anthropology: for it raises the question of whether there can even be such a thing as 'Aboriginal-nonAboriginal' relations—or as 'cross-cultural' relations in general—the very kinds of relations which anthropology has turned into an apparently exact science.

The problem is very like the contending reasons for the 'failure of language', as some literary theorists have called it. The first reason, a highly romantic one, has to do with 'mysteriousness': as if the world were so complex, fragmented and ineffable that language as a mere human creation could barely scratch the surface of it. As if God's creation were so vast and difficult that our simple systems were like a prehistoric bone poking at a vast bank of microchips. But one must suspect that Eric Michaels would not support this version of why "the contradictions of [the] system resist resolution" (BAA, 72). Yet it's always a risk, writing this way. The critique of knowledge may easily seem to be a vote for the ineffability of its object. And that is clearly not what Michaels wants.

However, the second reason for the 'failure' is that language or any cultural system isn't actually that sort of thing, in the first place, something which 'fails' or 'succeeds' at all, since the very ideas of failure and success are given in, by and through, language. There is no point outside language from which to measure or think its absence or presence, its success or failure compared to some 'other', some 'other-than-language'. If there's a 'failure' here, it's an intrinsic one. The failure of language is its utterly terrible and total success: its irremovability, the fact that it permits no other, except silence—and that too tells us nothing. So, by the same token, formal systems of knowledge fail because they dissipate into nothingness as soon as we try to be precise about how they operate. We can't, logically, know what it is *not* to know.

In this second case, knowledge does not fail because of the intrinsic unavailability of the Other (its object), rather it fails when it reaches its own logical limits. Yet anthropology has rarely subscribed to this second view. [\[note 10\]](#) It has been constructed as that type of formal knowledge (or discipline) which acknowledged the problematic availability of the Other and transferred this alterity on to specifically racial or cultural others. In a sense, 'white-black' was always its synecdoche for 'known-unknown'. And this is why, when it fails, it must fail, logically; and why—in so far as it can succeed—it does so. For if there are no longer any good grounds for sustaining the figure of the black as the Other, then there are no black-white (or other cross-cultural) relations for anthropology to study or, a fortiori, to use as an analytic resource for other types of investigation. To repeat, this is not for reasons of mysteriousness. It is not because 'these people' (blacks and whites) have 'nothing to do with one another'. The failure is not an empirical matter at all. It is logical/theoretical. It stems from the fact that anthropology has, *on its own terms*, set itself the task of knowing *what it has already defined* as unknowable—as beyond knowability. Its object disappears. And for a similar reason, so does a category like Art. For that matter, so do sub-categories like the Good and or the Bad. If 'Bad', 'Aboriginal', 'Art' are in jeopardy so to is/are 'Good', 'White', 'Science'.

What Eric Michaels challenges, in these few sentences, and also elsewhere in his writings, is the necessity of taking anthropology on its own terms. He even shows that it might be better for it if it did not. That is, if it were to stop short

of defining itself as the science of the unknowable. This seems to me to be the obvious concomitant of the absence of a notion of 'authentic art'. It stands synecdochally for the absence of authentic anthropological concepts in general.

[\[note 11\]](#)

So back to the first paragraph and the 'flavour of the month': it "is an odd descriptor Australians overuse to resolve the incompatibility [sic] of such reports of Australian success overseas with a cherished and characteristic myth of the second rate, sometimes labelled cultural cringe". Curiously, it resolves the dichotomy because it tells Australians that we're both great and also lousy: the 'in' flavour which must last only for a short period. To enjoy or celebrate the cringe means, perhaps paradoxically or even perversely, not bragging or boasting. But for Aboriginal paintings to come under the aegis of the cringe, they have first to be considered as unproblematically *Australian*. And that is always going to be an unresolvable difficulty when it comes to the classification of Aboriginal objects and artefacts—if only because the designation 'Australian' is or was, by definition, imposed on Aborigines, no matter how many black individuals may concur with the classification as a self-descriptor. 'Australian' is a white European predicate. It routinely qualifies the word 'Aborigine' itself; but it may also be used in contradistinction: 'not Australian, Koori', for example. Or more importantly, 'not Aboriginal, Koori'.

At the same time, the term 'Australian Aborigine' circulates and flourishes on foreign markets so that perhaps only certain kinds of fauna have become more typical signifiers of Australianness than Aborigines—and their art. It has become a standard way to say 'Australia' in Qantas commercials, tourist brochures, Vegemite ads, rock songs and so on. A black face, usually a man's with a long beard and a broad squat nose. A didgeridoo. Papunya dots ... (more so than Yuendumu "sloppy") ... in red, black and ochre, "what Brisbane upholsterers call 'autumn tonings'" (BAA, 67). The signification only succeeds, of course, if the viewer is complicit in the idea that Aborigines are something which Australia has 'got', like Ayer's Rock, kangaroos and the Sydney Opera House. Aborigines have to be synecdochal (and to be that they have first to be included as constituent parts), or else the fact that they are other-than-Australian might seep through the surface and destroy the effect. (Imagine: Palestinians in traditional costume used to advertise holidays in what is sometimes called 'Israel'.) It is even possible, as we shall see, to find Eric Michaels himself risking the odd move and gesture in this kind of game: the pretence by which Aborigines are the 'original *Australians*', as though the second term collected a homogeneous population starting several million years ago.

Contradictions abound here. No sooner is one position worked out (for example 'successful Australians') than another crops up to rub it out ('the Cringe'). No sooner is one concept located (Bad Art) than another has to demand equal attention (Good Science). In some contemporary forms of analysis, we seem to face both a plenitude of mythically equalised opposite contenders (black/white, woman/man, art/science) and an effacement of each by its other. We have the threat of both a plenum and a void at the same time. The 'same time' is postmodern time: requiring new terminological strategies—perhaps arbitrary ones—like locating the Warlpiri as Western rather than Central, their paintings as calligrammic/postmodern/proto-writing rather than "primitive (Dreamtime)" (BAA, 72), etc.

A case in point: "Indeed, Australia now has a suspiciously elaborate terminology for identifying the contradictions of colonialism and creativity. The notion of radical unoriginality is claimed to privilege this discourse, so that Sydney for example now asserts itself as the most dislocated, imitative, unoriginal, and therefore, *postmodern* city (which only goes to show that Sydneysiders never make it north to Brisbane) [2]". (Again, the bracketed footnote number is his.) Here a veritable cornucopia of contradictions emerge. Firstly: colonialism and creativity—or how to make claims to originality when one is by definition derivative? The line of questioning is obviously critical (hence the terms "suspiciously" and "claimed to privilege"). Yet it is positively critical, for it seems to invite Australians to think of a possible way out of the dilemma. Perhaps something like this: colonialism is imposed on us. 'Us'? So who was doing the imposing if not those who now call themselves 'Australians'? It must be a mythical historical figure: 'the British', for example. So what, among other things, are Australians? Clearly what is called 'the colonial period' only marginally involved Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks and Chinese (among others). So who was colonised—if 'Australians' were colonised at the hands of Anglo-Celtic invaders? Aborigines perhaps?

So that's how the trick comes to be done. 'Not-Aboriginal' slides into 'not-original', with the suture barely showing. If not being original is then the dominant cultural style of (white) Australia, then that, paradoxically, must be done with flair and creativity. Accordingly Michaels coins a term for this elaborate Australian self-contradiction: "radical unoriginality". One might think (especially since he was once American) that the term was meant unkindly—in the

way that some people speak of others as 'terminally nice' and so on. But I'm sure this reading would be wrong. Michaels is, I think, seriously proposing that the paradoxically unique feature of Australian culture is that it's predicated on a deep mass fear of uniqueness itself. [\[note 12\]](#) The fear, he proposes, is so deep that it's productive: uniquely productive. Conveniently perhaps, postmodernism has recently valorised anti-original practices (derivation, borrowing, bricolage, offshore reassembly and the rest); it has made them "flavour of the month". Sydney and Brisbane come into mutual contention, now, somewhat as Sydney and Melbourne once did. Except that Sydney and Melbourne traditionally contended for sophistication.

And although Eric Michaels doesn't mention it just at this point in the text, we can see that another contradiction is lurking here: that the major success-in-kringe's-clothing which allows radical unoriginality to flourish is Aboriginal artwork. It is produced by those who were once pre-Australians, whose ancestors predate the nomenclature of 'Australia', the only possible 'Australians' without an obvious relation of identity or complicity with Euro-colonialism. The strange promise of Aboriginal art, in New York or Japan, therefore, must be not *simply* its surface similarity to contemporary minimalism or expressionism but also the fact that it does carry the label of 'authenticity' and 'originality'; that it is, for many its consumers, the expression of "the primitive (Dreamtime)". Any parallel, as it were, seeks to flatter white Euro-American minimalism and expressionism by showing their points of contact with a deep-seated exemplar of artistic integrity: 'primitive' art. You can take the Picassos out of the desert, but you can't take the desert out of the Picassos (cf. BAA, 62). And the fact that this reading may be utterly wrong or fraudulent in purely productional terms does not prevent it from being a dominant one in the 'art world' and routinely used at the point of sale.

Turning to the footnote: "Susan Dermody (1987) made this claim at the Power Institute's forum on the debate between postmodernism and cultural studies. Overseas guest Dick Hebdige would only admit that the debates on the subject were very advanced in Sydney. See Meaghan Morris' adroit management of this contradiction of displacement in her reading of *Crocodile Dundee*, *Art & Text*, 25, (June-August 1987), pp. 36-69". I'd like to be able to read this footnote such that Dick Hebdige were commenting on the Sydney-Brisbane controversy; but that's plainly not the case, since this is something which Michaels has introduced himself—perhaps even as an original contribution—for the purposes of this article ('Bad Aboriginal Art') only. So Hebdige must be read as responding to a consultation about the degree to which Sydney counts as postmodern—assuming we can take that to be what the term "the subject" refers to, omitting all the possible other meanings it has these days. So there is a problem; though it's not Eric Michaels' problem. He distances himself, yet again, by using this rather journalistic term, 'claim': the problem is someone else's, specifically Dermody's and (via another synecdoche) Sydney's. The problem is: how do you know whether you're postmodern if you happen to be (in) Sydney? It seems that how you do it is to consult a cultural studies expert from England, Dick Hebdige—even though, strangely enough, there's a suspicion of an opposition between postmodernism and cultural studies in this footnote—a "debate between" them. If, however, the postmodern is there, in Sydney, then by definition it could not have originated there. If it had, there would be no "radical unoriginality". So it has to have originated, *wherever one happens to be*, elsewhere. It has to have come from somewhere else. So—logically, perhaps—you get someone from somewhere else to tell you. (Notice: no mention of Birmingham or London so far in this, but a massive unspoken presence of 'the British'.) The problem then is that you know that whoever you consult must be unreliable—even if they are Dick Hebdige—because whoever has got postmodernism must necessarily have got it from somewhere else. So either it's just circulating around from one 'origin' to another (which defeats the very notion of origin) or you have to pose the impossible idea of an Elsewhere-than-Everywhere for it to come from. This is why postmodernism requires either or both a plenum and/or a void. It is also why the idea of something originating here, Australia, is apparently so difficult.

So "What Australia (and postmodernism) may not have a vocabulary to deal with so readily is the unwelcome appearance of any possible claims to authentic creativity, as with our own indigenous art". This last sentence of the paragraph is, in many ways, the most problematic. It is possible that, if we can unravel it, we will come to a deeper understanding of what it is that seems so quirky and elusive, so defiant, almost so original about Eric Michaels' way of approaching culture and cultural objects. It might bring us, that is, to understand his style(s).

Firstly, the identification with postmodernism by a few Sydney theorists leads to an elision between Australia itself and postmodernism. At the very least, they have a problem in common. Already we've seen that both Australia and postmodern thought have a sort of elective affinity for one another (to revert to a very unpopular theoretical

vocabulary). But, on this pretext, they get conflated here so that Australia's cringe becomes somehow equivalent to postmodernism's theoretical displacement of originality. The Australian mass-moral, that is, is conflated with the postmodern theoretical. Australia may, though it's arguable, fear originality—almost as much as it fears Aboriginality. And postmodern thinkers, Baudrillard for example, to mention just one dubious contender—at least for the second term in the expression—have attempted to decentre the notion of a *textual* origin so that there is only an indefinite play of signifier upon signifier, text on text, with no ultimate authorised version grounding all others. But what's missing in this elision (which may or may not be Eric Michaels' elision, for the word "claim" is still partly in operation) is the fact that these two notions of originality are practically the opposite of one another, at least on a certain reading.

In postmodernism, 'original' means 'canonical': *originary*. In the other sense, that is in the sense of the Australian cultural cringe, 'original' means 'fresh' or 'new'—precisely the opposite of 'canonical' and 'authorised'. So, in this sense, creativity is the very opposite of a fixed form of textual origination. In some ways postmodernism is all for, and writes 'loudly' *on behalf of*, new and playful ways of doing things. It is pro-originality in this sense. Postmodernism may have to patch its proper objects together in the fashion of the bricoleur; but it does like to see what it can get away with—in an almost old-fashioned Dadaist sort of way. If the cringe fears Young Turks, postmodernism only fears Old Greeks—that Plato, for example. [\[note 13\]](#)

So there is a quirk of style going on here (in 'Bad Aboriginal Art')—though again whether or not Eric Michaels is responsible is a tendentious matter. By invoking a multiplicity of contradictions, 'Bad Aboriginal Art', is able to bring off the *feel* of similitude: Australia with postmodernism, and creativity with origination. The problem is that there is a residue, a constant possibility that these things each remain distinct from one another, as we have seen. And that residue—while it gives the text its tension and its unique angle—remains unmentioned. If we mention it, then a term like "authentic creativity" becomes a contradiction in terms. If we leave it unmentioned—if we go along with the text of 'Bad Aboriginal Art' in what may be its own terms—then "authentic creativity" becomes a pleonasm. But either way it's problematic. Consequently these may be the grounds (the stylistic grounds) upon which Michaels eventually builds his argument for rejecting *all* types of discourse about authenticity. This may also explain why, with authenticity officially removed as a concept, various substitutes (validity, authority) must be found. Otherwise the argument is simple: Aboriginal art has merely lapsed into the postmodern miasma along with everything else.

Hence the problematic expression "our own indigenous art". The phrase 'our own' is widely used in contemporary Australia and the 'w' tends to get sounded when the phrase is spoken, producing 'ow-woan'. It's used frequently on the ABC, especially by politicians who want to try to get away with some spurious collectivising now that terms like 'national interest' have done their dash. So 'our own' has a rather dubious history and usage. And then, in place of 'Aboriginal art' we find "indigenous art". Perhaps the reason for these expressions is that Eric Michaels would be, as we have seen, among the very small group of whites who can claim to have participated in 'Aboriginal' painting. Perhaps he writes in the way that an American cameraman working on an Australian movie might. But perhaps not. As usual, the overall stance or position remains unclear, left deliberately indeterminate. [\[note 14\]](#) But what does seem to be on the agenda here is at least a suspicion—against the general drift of 'Bad Aboriginal Art' as a whole—that there is a single uniform Australian entity, an effective 'our own'. This seems to neglect the very diversity which, elsewhere, Michaels makes a central topic—the multiplicity of cultural forces working both together (under the romantic rubric of 'multiculturalism') and against one another in a kind of war for cultural supremacy—at least now that the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture is beginning to display fatal signs of weakness. And to each of these contending positions there is at least one notion of the indigenous. To claim Aboriginal work as effectively 'the' indigenous which underpins all of these would be highly problematic—if that's what the text of 'Bad Aboriginal Art' is proposing at this early stage. It would, in its way, even be a little romantic. But surely that could not be the effect that Michaels wants here?

What is important, for an understanding of his style(s), is the fact that he is prepared to flirt with the possibility. He skirts around it; cruises the neighbourhood in search of possibilities. This is the risk he takes with style: but always leaving a margin of difference and distance from the illicit discourses of, as Stephen Muecke once put it, racism, romanticism and anthropology. [\[note 15\]](#)

By, as it were, partly disowning and partly still using notions like postmodernity and Australianism, he puts himself into a position where he can practically sound like a traditional cultural critic, upholding the virtues of creation,

creativity, uniqueness and genius. But undercutting the risk is that word again—'claims', as in "claims to authentic creativity". So because the text barely stakes its own macro-theoretical claims, and merely records those staked by others, whatever one tries to make of expressions like "authentic creativity", one's reading is always modulated, pushed to one side by the distance between the text's own elusive discourse and that of its object(s). To write about 'claims to x' rather than 'x' is to put 'x' into a position of some dubiousness—to put it, as it were, within brackets—to try it on for size without buying. The central object, 'x', is made even more distant by further modulating the word 'claims' so that it becomes "any possible claims". Any definiteness about 'authentic creativity' has now been severely undercut. And we should remember that this has been the case throughout the text-so-far: beginning as it does not with a direct claim about the popularity of 'dot paintings' overseas but with a statement about reports in the press on that matter. It's a case, perhaps, of no names, no pack-drill. Who is saying this? Who is saying they're good and valuable? New York, Paris, Munich. Who is saying they're saying this? The Australian press. Why does this first paragraph skirt around direct address so much? Why does it fail to state a named and dated position and offer a direct critique of it?

One can only speculate on the answers to these questions. But the effect is clear: it is Michaels' own analytic discourse which makes 'authenticity' a problematic category. The problem with the term arises in the first paragraph of the paper, even prior to specific works and projects being discussed. In that paragraph, the notion of a 'claim' is used to distance the text itself from its object texts and, in the process, to leave the specificity of those texts unmentioned. Later in the paper, in fact in the second paragraph, Michaels briefly turns this notion of claims and claiming away from being a stylistic resource for his own writing and (albeit briefly) into a topic of analysis. That is he states that his topic is to be the "putting into discourse" (BAA, 59) of Aboriginal art, which is also a putting into definite economic values. Now it's clear that economic values depend on the discourse(s) that surround works of art and makes them interpretable for what they are. Accordingly, with this final act of distancing, Michaels heavily reduces the possibility of his being a contender for the title of conservative critic, having skirted that possibility so closely up to now.

It is only with this further turn, then—one which is retained, with some significant lapses, throughout the remainder of 'Bad Aboriginal Art'—that Michaels can approach a critique of the idea of "authentic creativity"; that is, of both *originarity* and creation *ab novo*. These are now clearly ideas; ideas which are the ostensibly main topic of the paper's analysis; ideas belonging to some person or persons still unknown. These ideas or modes of discourse have been placed around, and formed as an economico-discursive context for, Aboriginal art. But not in any clear and straightforward way. For, what routinely happens in arenas of critical brokerage is that works and genres of work are tabled and arranged; lines are drawn between the worthy and the unworthy, the inside and the outside, the good and the bad. (This ground has been covered already, above.) So, Eric Michaels wants to ask, what happens when one member of such a mutually supportive pair of categories is missing? How can a judgment make sense without the possibility of its opposite? And, he claims, this is what has happened, empirically and historically, with Aboriginal art. But then, perhaps unfortunately, his analysis moves away from marketing and brokerage towards the 'supply side'.

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In conclusion, what my 'stylistic' analysis has shown is that Michaels' indeterminacy in the domain of a general theory of Aboriginal art actually arises from the fact that he wants (especially at the opening of his paper) to retain—albeit in 'play'—a number of the concepts which, by the end of the paper, are clearly unavailable to him as analytic resources. This is why, for example, he is necessarily (intentionally) unclear over questions such as (1) the relation between Aboriginal art and contemporary Euro-American artistic movements; (2) the criteria for judging and evaluating works; (3) any general theory of socio-political 'authority' as a replacement for aestheticist categories of judgment; (4) the merit or otherwise of white interventions. Instead, he offers distinctly piecemeal interrogations of highly specific sites of production (with occasional mentions of consumption such as "the market's requirements for exchange-value fodder" (BAA, 72)). Within such an analytic discourse (and I mean this as a positive rather than a negative criticism) any kind of resolution must necessarily founder. The problem, from this point on, would be to ask whether analytic work of this kind can continue as a counter-aesthetic program, carried on by other researchers, or whether it must remain the unique style of this most maverick anthropologist.

2. John Fiske, for example, writes that Aborigines are "able to make Third World understandings of *Rambo* and to construct (along with Cherokees) "antiwhite" meanings for country and western songs, among other feats of subversive reading. See *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp.166-167.
3. Kenneth Liberman, *Understanding Interaction in Central Australia: An Ethnomethodological Study of Australian Aboriginal People* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).
4. See, for example, the "Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788-1988" shown at a number of State galleries during 1988 and partially available in Daniel Thomas and Ron Radford (eds.), *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788-1988* (International Cultural Corporation of Australia Ltd/Art Gallery Board of South Australia: Adelaide, 1988).
5. The term 'reflexive' is used here in Garfinkel's sense. See Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967).
6. William Gibson, *Count Zero* (New York: Ace Books, 1987), pp.103-4.
7. See David King and Alec McHoul, "The Discursive Production of the Queensland Aborigine as Subject: Meston's Proposal, 1895," *Social Analysis*, n.19, 1986, pp.22-39.
8. Jean Baudrillard, "Gesture and Signature: Semiurgy in Contemporary Art," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (trans. C. Levin), (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p.103. Quoted in BAA, p.61.
9. And it should be remembered that 'Bad Aboriginal Art' is a version of a paper presented at the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney in 1987.
10. But see James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
11. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card* (trans. A. Bass), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
12. Cf BAA, p.70, where Michaels discusses his intervention into the production of a specific painting (the abovementioned canvas from which the Papunya-style dots were partly erased). The painting reached record prices and now hangs in the National Gallery. But Michaels' coda on these events is simply: "whatever that tells us about our example, and whatever questions it raises about interventions". This is what I mean by 'indeterminacy'.
13. Stephen Muecke, "Available Discourses on Aborigines," in *Theoretical Strategies* (Local Consumption Series 2/3), (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1982), pp.98-111.
14. Cf. his insistence, noted throughout the present analysis, on 'authority' as a direct substitute for 'authenticity'.